

THE GOSPEL OF SECOND CHANCES



Max Lucado

It's not every day that you get a second chance. Most of the time you're glad to get a first one. "Get this to me by 3 p.m. or you're fired!" "I'm sorry, but your grades aren't high enough to admit you to the program." "I don't love you any more."

The fact is, we all fail. We do things we regret. We say things we deplore. And we hurt people we love.

But we're not alone in this. Even the Apostle Paul was no stranger to failure.

I do not understand the things I do. I do not do what I want to do, and I do the things I hate.
(Romans 7:15)

He goes on: *I want to do the things that are good, but I do not do them. I do not do the things I want to do, but I do the bad things I do not want to do.*

Have you been there? Have you shared Paul's frustration? If you have, then listen as he shows us the way out of our despair:

Who will save me from this body that brings death? I thank God for saving me through Jesus Christ our Lord! So now, those who are in Christ Jesus are not judged guilty (Romans 7:24-8:1)

If I had been Paul, I might have put a "Hallelujah!" on the end of that paragraph. What an incredible statement. What an awesome reality!

Need a second chance? You've come to the right place. Second chances are the specialty of our Savior!

FORGIVEN FOREVER

Ninety feet tall. One thousand three hundred twenty tons of reinforced Brazilian tile. Positioned on a mountain a mile and one-half above sea level. It's the famous *Christ the Redeemer* statue that overlooks the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

No tourist comes to Rio without snaking up Corcovado Mountain to see this looming monument. The head alone is nine feet tall. The wingspan from fingertip to fingertip — sixty-three feet.

While living in Rio, I saw the statue dozens of times. But no one time was as impressive as the first.

I was a college student spending a summer in Brazil. Except for scampers across the Mexican border, this was my first trip outside the continental U.S. I had known this monument only through *National Geographic* magazine. I was to learn that no magazine can truly capture the splendor of *Christo Redentor*.

Below me was Rio. Seven Million people swarming on the lush green mountains that crash into the bright blue Atlantic. Behind me was the *Christ the Redeemer* statue. As I looked at the towering edifice through my telephoto lens, two ironies caught my attention.

I couldn't help but notice the blind eyes. Now, I know what you are thinking — all statues have blind eyes. You are right, they do. But it's as if the sculptor of this statue intended that the eyes be blind. There are no circles to suggest sight. There are only Little Orphan Annie opening.

I lowered my camera to my waist. *What kind of redeemer is this? Blind? Eyes fixated on the horizon, refusing to see the mass of people at its feet?*

I saw the second irony as I again raised my camera. I followed features downward, past the strong nose, past the prominent chin, past the neck. My focus came to rest on the cloak of the statue. On the outside of the cloak there is a heart. A Valentine's heart. A simple heart.

A stone heart.

The unintended symbolism staggered me. *What kind of redeemer is this? Heart made of stone? Held together, not with passion and love, but by concrete and mortar. What kind of redeemer is this? Blind eyes and a stony heart?*

I've since learned the answer to my own question: What kind of a redeemer is this? Exactly the kind of redeemer most people have.

Oh, most people would not admit to having a blind redeemer with a stone heart. But take a closer look.

For some, Jesus is a good luck charm. The "Rabbit's Foot Redeemer." Pocket-sized. Handy. Easily packaged. Easily understood. Easily diagramed. You can put his picture on your wall or you can stick it in your wallet as insurance. You can frame him. Dangle him from your rear view mirror or glue him to your dashboard.

His specialty? Getting you out of a jam. Need a parking place? Rub the redeemer. Need help on a quiz? Pull out the rabbit's foot. No need to have a relationship with him. No need to love him. Just keep him in your pocket next to your four-leaf clover.

For many he's an "Aladdin's Lamp Redeemer." New jobs, pink cadillacs, new and improved spouses. Your wish is his command. And what's more, he conveniently reenters the lamp when you don't want him around.

For others, Jesus is a "Monty Hall Redeemer." "All right, Jesus, let's make a deal. For fifty-two Sundays a year, I'll put on a costume — coat and tie, hat and hose — and I'll endure any sermon you throw at me. In exchange, you give me the grace behind pearly gate number three."

The Rabbit's Foot Redeemer. The Aladdin's Lamp Redeemer. The Monty Hall Redeemer. Few demands, no challenges. No need for sacrifice. No need for commitment.

Sightless and heartless redeemers. Redeemers without power. That's not the Redeemer of the New Testament.

Compare the blind Christ I saw in Rio to the compassionate one seen by a frightened woman early one morning in Jerusalem.

It's dawn. The early morning sun stretches a golden blanket across the streets of the city. A cat stretches as it awakens. The noises are scattered.

A rooster crows his early morning recital.

A dog barks to welcome the day.

A peddler shuffles down the street, his wares on his back.

And a young carpenter speaks in the courtyard.

Jesus sits surrounded by a horseshoe of listeners. Some nod their heads in agreement and open their hearts in obedience. They have accepted the Teacher as their teacher and are learning to accept him as their Lord.

Others are curious, wanting to believe, yet wary of this one whose claims so stretch the boundaries of belief.

Whether cautious or convinced, they listened keenly. They arose early. There was something about his words that was more comforting than sleep.

We don't know his topic that morning. Prayer, perhaps. Or maybe kindness or anxiety. But whatever it was, it was soon interrupted when people burst into the courtyard.

Determined, they erupt out of a narrow street and stomp toward Jesus. The listeners scramble to get out of the way. The mob is made up of religious leaders, the elders and deacons of their day. Respected and important men. And struggling to keep her balance on the crest of this angry wave is a scantily clad woman.

Only moments before she had been in bed with a man who was not her husband. Was this how

she made her living? Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe her husband was gone, her heart was lonely, the stranger's touch was warm, and before she knew it, she had done it. We don't know.

But we do know that a door was jerked open and she was yanked from her bed. She barely had time to cover her body before she was dragged into the street by two men the age of her father. What thoughts raced through her mind as she scrambled to keep her feet?

Curious neighbors stuck heads through open windows. Sleepy dogs yelped at the ruckus.

And now, with holy strides, the mob storms toward the teacher. They throw the woman in his direction. She nearly falls.

"We found this woman in bed with a man!" cries the leader. "The law says to stone her. What do you say?"

Cocky with borrowed courage, they smirk as they watch the mouse go for the cheese.

The woman searches the faces, hungry for a compassionate glance. She finds none. Instead, she sees accusation. Squinty eyes. Tight lips. Gritted teeth. Stares that sentence without seeing.

Cold, stony hearts that condemn without feeling.

She looks down and sees the rocks in their hands — the rocks of righteousness intended to stone the lust out of her. The men squeeze them so tightly that their fingertips are white. They squeeze them as if the rocks were the throat of the preacher they hate.

In her despair she looks at the Teacher. His eyes don't glare. "Don't worry," the eyes whisper, "it's okay." And for the first time that morning she sees kindness.

When Jesus saw her, what did he see? Did he see her as a father sees his grown daughter as she walks down the wedding aisle? The father's mind races back through time watching his girl grow up again — from diapers to dolls. From classrooms to boyfriends. From the prom date to the wedding day. The father sees it all as he looks at his daughter.

As Jesus looked at this daughter, did his mind race back? Did he relive the act of forming his child in heaven? Did he see her as he had originally made her?

"Knitted together" is how the psalmist described the process of God making man. Not manufactured or mass-produced, but knitted. Each thread of personality tenderly intertwined. Each string of temperament deliberately selected.

God as creator. Pensive. Excited. Inventive.

An artist, brush on pallet, seeking the perfect shade.

A composer fingers on keyboard, listening for the exact chord.

A poet, pen poised on paper, awaiting the precise word.

The Creator, the master weaver, threading together the soul.

Each one different. No two alike. None identical.

On earth, Jesus was an artist in a gallery of his own paintings. He was a composer listening as the orchestra interpreted his music. He was a poet hearing his own poetry. Yet his works of art had been defaced. Creation after battered creation.

He had created people for splendor. They had settled for mediocrity. He had formed them with love. They had scarred each other with hate.

When he saw businessmen using God-given intelligence to feed Satan-given greed...

When he saw tongues that had been designed to encourage used as daggers to cut...

When he saw hands that had been given for holding used as weapons for hurting...

When he saw eyes into which he'd sprinkled joy now burning with hatred...

I wonder, did it weary him to see hearts that were stained, even discarded?

Jesus saw such a heart as he looked at this woman. Her feet were bare and muddy. Her arms hid her chest and her hands clutched at each other under her chin. And her heart was ragged; torn as much by her own guilt as by the mob's anger.

So, with the tenderness only a father can have, he set out to untie the knots and repair the holes.

He begins by diverting the crowd's attention. He draws on the ground. Everybody looks down. The woman feels relief as the eyes of the men look away from her.

The accusers are persistent. "Tell us, Teacher! What do you want us to do with her?"

He could have asked why they didn't bring the man. The Law indicted him as well. He could have been asked why they were suddenly blowing the dust off an old command that had sat on the shelves for centuries. But he didn't.

He just raised his head and offered an invitation, "I guess if you've never made a mistake, then you have the right to stone this woman." He looked back down and began to draw on the earth again. Someone cleared his throat as if to speak, but no one spoke. Feet shuffled. Eyes dropped. Then thud...thud...thud...rocks fell to the ground.

And they walked away. Beginning with the grayest beard and ending with the blackest, they turned and left. They came as one, but they left one by one.

Jesus told the woman to look up. "Is there no one to condemn you?" He smiled as she raised her head. She saw no one, only rocks — each one a miniature tombstone to mark the burial place of a man's arrogance.

"Is there no one to condemn you?" he'd asked. *There is still one who can*, she thinks. And she turns to look at him.

What does he want? What will he do?

Maybe she expected him to scold her. Perhaps she expected him to walk away from her. I'm not sure, but I do know this: What she got, she never expected. She got a promise and a commission.

The promise: "Then neither do I condemn you."

The commission: "Go and sin no more."

The woman turns and walks into anonymity. She's never seen or heard from again. But we can be confident of one thing: On that morning in Jerusalem, she saw Jesus and Jesus saw her. And could we somehow transport her to Rio de Janeiro and let her stand at the base of the *Christo Redentor*, I know what her response would be.

"That's not the Jesus I saw," she would say. And she would be right. For the Jesus she saw didn't have a hard heart. And the Jesus that saw her didn't have blind eyes.

However, if we could somehow transport her to Calvary and let her stand at the base of the cross...you know what she would say. "That's him," she would whisper. "That's him."

She would recognize his hands. The only hands that held no stones that day were his. And on this day they still hold no stones. She would recognize his voice. It's raspier and weaker, but the words are the same, "Father, forgive them..." And she would recognize his eyes. How could she ever forget those eyes? Clear and tear-filled. Eyes that saw her not as she was, but as she was intended to be.

1 John 8:1-11

2 Psalm 139:13

FORGOTTEN FOREVER

I was thanking the Father today for his mercy. I began listing the sins he'd forgiven. One by one I thanked God for forgiving my stumbles and tumbles. My motives were pure and my heart was thankful, but my understanding of God was wrong. It was when I used the word *remember* that it hit me.

"Remember the time I..." I was about to thank God for another act of mercy. But I stopped. Something was wrong. The word *remember* seemed displaced. It was an off-key note in a sonata, a misspelled word in a poem. It didn't fit. "Does he remember?"

Then *I* remembered. I remembered his words. "And I will remember their sins no more." ¹

Wow! Now, *that* is a remarkable promise.

God doesn't just forgive, he forgets. He erases the board. He destroys the evidence. He burns the microfilm. He clears the computer.

He doesn't remember my mistakes. For all the things he does do, this is one thing he refuses to do. He refuses to keep a list of my wrongs. When I ask for forgiveness he doesn't pull out a clipboard and say, "But I've already forgiven him for that five hundred and sixteen times."

He doesn't remember.

"As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us." ²

"I will be merciful toward their iniquities." ³

"Even if you are stained as red as crimson, I can make you white as wool." ⁴

No, he doesn't remember. But I do, you do. You still remember. You're like me. You still remember what you did before you changed. In the cellar of your heart lurk the ghosts of yesterday's sins. Sins you've confessed; errors of which you've repented; damage you've done your best to repair.

And though you're a different person, the ghosts still linger. Though you've locked the basement door, they still haunt you. They float to meet you, spooking your soul and robbing your joy. With wordless whispers they remind you of moments when you forgot whose child you were.

That horrid lie.

That business trip you took away from home, that took you so far away from home.

The time you exploded in anger.

Those years spent in the hollow of Satan's hand.

That day you were needed, but didn't respond.

That date.

That jealousy.

That habit.

Poltergeists from yesterday's pitfalls. Spiteful specters that slyly suggest, "Are you really forgiven? Sure, God forgets most of our mistakes, but do you think he could actually forget the time you..."

As a result, your spiritual walk has a slight limp. Oh, you're still faithful. You still do all the right things and say the right words. But just when you begin to make strides, just when your wings begin to spread and you prepare to soar like an eagle, the ghost appears. It emerges from the swamps of your soul and causes you to question yourself.

"You can't teach a Bible class with your background."

"You, a missionary?"

"How dare you ask him to come to church. What if he finds out about the time you fell away?"

"Who are *you* to offer help?"

The ghost spews waspish words of accusation, deafening your ears to the promises of the cross. And it flaunts your failures in your face, blocking your vision of the Son and leaving you the shadow of a doubt.

Now honestly. Do you think God sent that ghost? Do you think God is the voice that reminds you of the putridness of your past? Do you think God was teasing when he said, "I will remember your sins no more?"

Was he exaggerating when he said he would cast our sins as far as the east is from the west? Do you actually believe he would make a statement like "I will not hold their sins against them" and then rub our noses in them whenever we ask for help?

Of course you don't. You and I just need an occasional reminder of God's nature, his forgetful nature.

To love conditionally is against God's nature. Just as it's against your nature to eat trees and against mine to grow wings, it's against God's nature to remember forgiven sins.

You see, God is either the God of perfect grace...or he is not God. Grace forgets. Period. He who is perfect love cannot hold grudges. If he does, then he isn't perfect love. And if he isn't perfect love, you might as well put this booklet down and go fishing, because both of us are chasing fairy tales.

But I believe in his loving forgetfulness. And I believe he has a gracious terrible memory.

Think about this. If he didn't forget, how could we pray? How could we sing to him? How could we dare enter into his presence if the moment he saw us he remembered all of our pitiful past? How could we enter his throne room wearing the rags of our selfishness and gluttony? We couldn't.

And we don't. Read this powerful passage from Paul's letter to the Galatians and watch your

pulse rate. You're in for a thrill. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ Jesus have *put on Christ*." ⁵

You read it right. We have "put on" Christ. When God looks at us he doesn't see us; he sees Christ. We "wear" him. We are hidden in him; we are covered by him. As the song says, "Dressed in his righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne."

Presumptuous, you say? Sacrilegious? It would be if it were my idea. But it isn't; it's his. We are presumptuous, not when we marvel at his grace, but when we reject it. And we're sacrilegious, not when we claim his forgiveness, but when we allow the haunting sins of yesterday to convince us that God forgives but he doesn't forget.

Do yourself a favor. Purge your cellar. Exorcise your basement. Take the Roman nails of Calvary and board up the door.

And remember...he forgets.

1. Hebrews 8:12 RSV
2. Psalm 103:12
3. Hebrews 8:12 RSV
4. Isaiah 1:18 TLB
5. Galatians 3:27 RSV (italics mine)

STUDY GUIDE

Chapter 1: *Forgiven Forever*

1. What kind of redeemer is this? I thought. Blind eyes and stony heart? I've since learned the answers to my own question: exactly the kind of redeemer most people have.

A. Do you agree with this observation? Explain your answer.

B. What kind of redeemer do you think your next door neighbor has? Your closest co-worker? You?

2. In her despair the woman looks at the Teacher. His eyes don't glare. "Don't worry," the eyes whisper, "it's okay." And for the first time that morning she sees kindness.

A. Imagine that you are this woman. What would you have expected to see in Jesus' eyes? What is running through your mind?

B. Does this passage mean that Jesus winks at sin? What does it mean?

3. On earth, Jesus was an artist in a gallery of his own paintings. He was a composer listening as the orchestra interpreted his music. He was a poet hearing his own poetry. Yet his works of art had been defaced, creation after battered creation. He had created people for splendor. They had settled for mediocrity. He had formed them with love. They had scarred each other with hate.

A. How are these images of "artist," "composer," and "poet" meant to remind us of Jesus? To what aspects of his personality or work do they refer?

B. Give five specific, personally-observed examples that illustrate the point of this passage.

4. "Is there no one to condemn you?" Jesus asked. There is still one who can, she thinks. And she turns to look at him. What does he want? What will he do?

A. Why does this woman think, "There is still one who can?"

B. What do you think Jesus wants of you?

5. She would recognize his eyes. How could she ever forget those eyes? Clear and tear-filled. Eyes that saw her not as she was, but as she was intended to be.

A. What did Jesus intend this woman to be? What does he intend you to be?

B. Does this passage give you hope? Why?

6. Read Luke 7:3-50

A. What things does the woman in this story have in common with the woman described in John 8?

B. What do you see in the eyes of this Pharisee when he looks at the woman (see verse 39)?

C. Compare the way Jesus dealt with the woman in this passage to the way he interacted with the woman of John 8. What things did he do similarly? What did he do differently?

D. What is the point of the story Jesus tells in verses 41-43? With which character in the story do you most identify? Why?

E. How would you answer the question raised in verse 49?

F. Do you think Jesus could repeat his words found in verse 50 to you? Why or why not?

For further thought...

- Ask your closest friend to tell you honestly what your behavior reveals about the kind of redeemer you have. Find out why he or she says this and make any changes you see are necessary.
- Reread the story in Luke 7:41-43. Write down the sins for which you have been forgiven - be sure to mention only those for which you have experienced God's forgiveness.
- If you do not feel as if God has forgiven you for much, pray that he will make you sensitive to the sin in your life. If you feel that your sins are so terrible that a holy God could not forgive you, read this chapter again, putting yourself in the place of the woman.

Chapter 2: *Forgotten Forever*

1. For all the things he [God] does do, this is one thing he refuses to do. He refuses to keep a list of my wrongs.

A. What good can come from remembering our sins? At what point does it become harmful to remember our sins?

B. The Bible uses several images to depict God's forgiveness of our sins. Which of these helps you most to visualize that God truly forgets: Psalm 103:12; Isaiah 1:18; Isaiah 43:25; Psalm 32:1; Isaiah 44:22?

C. Read Psalm 32, which is a psalm of praise for God's forgiveness. What insights does it give into the effect of unconfessed sin? Into God's response to the penitent heart?

D. On a piece of paper, write down a sin that you have had difficulty forgiving in yourself. Then erase your writing or burn the paper. When you are tempted to agonize over

that sin again, remember that it has been destroyed by God and by you.

2. We are presumptuous, not when we marvel at his grace, but when we reject it.

A. Why do you think people reject God's grace in forgiving sins? Why do people continue to feel guilty even after asking God's forgiveness?

B. Because we are clothed with Christ, how may we approach God's throne in prayer, according to these passages: Ephesians 3:8-12; Hebrews 4:14-16; Hebrews 10:19-23?

C. If we truly understand God's grace toward us, what is our natural response, according to Hebrews 10:24-25?

D. Based on the lesson, what do you want to remember better? What do you want to forget more easily?

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